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"Being backed up: Accounts by adolescent Bangladeshi boys, of growing up in the East End of London"

SHORT TITLE: *Accounts of Adolescent Bangladeshi Boys*

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Abstract

The present study explores how Bangladeshi adolescent boys describe and represent their experiences growing up in contemporary Britain today. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine adolescent Bangladeshi boys living in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. These qualitative data in the form of interview transcripts were analysed using Grounded Theory methodology. The analysis demonstrated how the notion of reciprocal support ('back-up') is a central part of the participant boys' experiences growing up in east London in 2002. These findings are discussed in relation to other literature and the provision of services for black and ethnic minority adolescents.

Introduction

During adolescence children make several transitions, negotiated not only between themselves and their families, but also between themselves and wider society. This can make adolescence a very difficult, even crisis driven, developmental stage for young people and their families (Mason, 1995). Jones (1995) states that certain socio-economic groups, particularly children from ethnic minorities, are inevitably placed at a disadvantage in their negotiation of adolescence. However, this does not account for the richness and diversity of Britain's ethnic minority communities, who have unique histories, cultures, and experiences, gained both before and since their migration to Britain (Coleman and Hendry, 1999).

Recognising that these communities are different from each other not only in terms of their culture of origin, but also in the ways that they have adapted to living within the economic, social and political climate of their immediate locality, is important in understanding the social fabric of the UK at the beginning of the 21st century. Mason (1995) suggests that the way academic theory has conceptualised race and culture in the past has contributed to a homogenisation and stereotyping of ethnic minority communities that is simplistic and unhelpful. Patel (1999) argues that this is a concern because it contributes to the failure of society to

understand and recognise the needs of young people from black and ethnic minorities, and helps to contribute towards the social discourse that maintains them in a marginalised and disadvantaged position.

Although disadvantage and discrimination are still likely to affect most ethnic minority young people in the UK today, exactly how the communities themselves resolve these issues depends largely upon their socio-political context (Ghuman, 1998). In order to hear their voices fully articulated through research, it is important to be specific about which community is being addressed, in addition to taking account of gender and economic variations in the experience of individuals within that community. As clinicians and academics working in East London, an area characterised by its large Bangladeshi community, the authors of this paper were interested in exploring one infrequently articulated voice in the literature on adolescence - that of Bangladeshi young people.

A conflicting picture of this group of young people has been presented in the literature. Studies based upon statistical data could be viewed as amplifying the negative, simplified media stereotype of them, tending to show them unfavourably compared with other groups (e.g., Rogers and others, 1997). In contrast, more situated and contextualised studies (e.g., Alexander's (2000) account of young Bangladeshi men in south east London in the mid-1990s) have demonstrated them to be resourceful and plucky, particularly in their relationship with what appeared to be often antagonistic local statutory services.

The Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets was founded at the beginning of the 20th Century by male migrant workers from Sylhet, a farming district of Bangladesh. From the outset, a number of tensions faced this population, centred largely upon how to balance their traditional rural, south east Asian, and Islamic values with those of an industrial western capitalist nation (Shaw, 1998). Adjusting to the experience of racial discrimination, and surviving urban poverty - including poor housing, poor health and unemployment - were also major issues (Modood and others, 1997). The community tended to cope with these tensions by remaining solidly committed to their cultural and religious traditions (Ghuman, 1998). By the 1970s this largely

male, migrant community was adapting to longer-term settlement by marrying and starting families in Britain. Subsequent generations, born and raised in the UK, were faced with similar challenges but developed less acceptant and more assertive coping strategies (Anwar, 1998; Archer, 2001; Ghuman 1998) in their struggle with a socially marginalised position. In order to balance a more individualist lifestyle with their respect for collective social processes, Ghuman (1998) suggests that Bangladeshi children have developed very strong friendship groups that include, but extend beyond, family relations.

This paper summarises research carried out in 2002, which was an explorative study documenting how a sample of Bangladeshi boys from Tower Hamlets talked about and represented their experiences of living and growing up in east London. It was hoped that a balanced illustration of this group of young people would be established and so a broad research remit was adopted; one that was as interested in the positive aspects of their experiences as it was in the negative.

Method

Methodological approach

As an under-represented group in society, a methodology providing for the boys to articulate their own voices was judged most appropriate. Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was chosen for its emphasis on allowing data and eventual theory to be generated by the target population. Data collection and analysis proceed concurrently, in stages, so that the early interviews inform the direction and focus of subsequent ones, towards the development of a theory organically related to the research topic stated at the outset.

Because of time constraints the authors adopted Willig's (2001 p.44) 'abbreviated' version of Grounded Theory, which allows for the absence of negative case analysis or theoretical sampling from members of populations outside the target group. It was anticipated that this would be a disadvantage, but it was also judged that such further analyses could be pursued as

extensions to the project, and conducted as future research either by the authors, or other interested parties.

Participants

Nine adolescent boys were recruited from the Bangladeshi community in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, all of whom attended the same secondary school. This school has an intake of Bangladeshi male students comprising more than 90% of those who attend. Participants were aged 12-15 years, drawn from school Years 8 (one boy), 9 (three boys), 10 (three boys) and 11 (two boys). The study did not include girls in its sample because it wished to remain sensitive to the gendered specificity of the experience of ethnic minority communities in Britain (Bumian and others, 1998).

Procedure

Once agreement had been secured from the school's Year Heads and Form Tutors, information letters and consent forms were sent to 30 pupils from Years 8, 9, 10 and 11. These pupils were chosen to represent boys who seemed to be doing well in school as well as those who seemed to be struggling (either socially withdrawing or demonstrating difficult to manage behaviour). The information pack was presented in English and in a Bengali/Sylhetti dialect. Consent at this stage was sought from the participants' parents/guardians, and a reply slip was provided for them to return if they agreed to their son to taking part. Of the original list of families contacted 30% returned their consent slips, and these boys were then invited to participate in an interview. All the boys invited were willing to participate.

The interview schedule was developed over a six week consultation period in which the first author set up meetings with multi-disciplinary professionals identified for their interest in, and specialist knowledge of, adolescence generally and the Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi community specifically. During these consultations the scope and focus of the initial interview schedule was developed and refined. The schedule sought to encourage the boys to discuss

issues that they believed to be most relevant to a conversation about their experiences growing up in Tower Hamlets. It adopted a solution focused perspective, in which - after a brief introduction to the project, and establishing consent to continue - the boys were invited to reflect upon the question 'If this is going to be a good interview, what three things would you like me to know about your life by the end of our discussion?' It was anticipated that the participants would discuss their family, friends, and neighbourhood, although enough flexibility was built into the process to allow space for the boys to explore any other topics that they wished to introduce. It ended on an intentionally positive note, by asking the boys to describe the things they enjoyed doing most at home and at school, in addition to checking that they were aware of the follow up options available to them, should they wish to discuss these themes in any greater detail.

Participants were individually interviewed by the first author, without teachers or parents being present, for 45-60 minutes each. The setting for the interviews was a private room at the school's Learning Support Centre (LSC). Data collection proceeded in three distinct stages (three interviews per stage); each stage included the interviews themselves, anonymised transcription, and analysis.

Data analysis

The data were processed following the Grounded Theory method advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Data coding moved from the breaking down of data into small conceptual chunks (open coding), before theorising links between them (axial coding) that were then pieced together to construct a number of theoretical models, called categories. Each category examines how the participants described their actions and interactions in relation to a given phenomenon that is seen to be the result of certain 'causal conditions'.

Results

The main categories

The categories and their constituent concepts were worded in the boys' own speech as far as possible. Although this gave a somewhat colloquial effect, it was judged by the researchers to maintain greater authenticity in illustrating the lived experience of the participants. The analysis generated five categories: Mucking About; What I Wanna Do; Being Backed Up; Having a Fight; and Racism. Once the data have been dismantled through Open Coding and re-built through Axial Coding, the final stage in producing a Grounded Theory is to select one category, the Core Category, to represent the research as a whole (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The Core Category was chosen to be 'Being Backed Up' and this forms the basis of the Grounded Theory presented in this paper. It was selected because notions of 'being backed up' were present in all four other categories and it appeared to the authors to be a foundation that underpinned the boys' descriptions and accounts of their lives (see Wells (2002) for a full report of the findings).

Core category – 'Being Backed Up'

This category (see Figure 1) refers to the way a need for support was negotiated between a participant and the individuals and groups around him. In the initial stages of data collection it seemed that 'back-up' was largely used to refer to the type of support friends give each other, but as the research progressed it became apparent that, regardless of the problem being addressed or its social context, the boys seemed to report similar strategies in assessing when they needed support, who they might go to for this, how they might ask for help, the type of help given and the consequences of this. Identifying and requesting help, or 'back-up', seemed to have some basic principles which were as applicable to the type of support offered by teachers and youth workers, for example, as they were to the type of support offered by friends and family. Our account of 'Being Backed Up' is given in the six-fold style of Strauss and Corbin (1990).

- Figure 1 about here -

(1) Causal conditions: I've got a problem.

The causal conditions comprising the background for a need for support, or 'back-up', centred upon the individual perceiving that he has a problem that needs attention. It was possible to locate the types of problems identified by the participant boys within four differing situations: school, family, friendship groups and their residential area. In school, the problems reported tended to concern the boys' relationship with their teachers. A good relationship was largely defined as being jointly co-operative, with the boy participating well, and the teacher providing interesting and proactive teaching support. A bad relationship was defined as jointly unco-operative, with the boy 'mucking about' and the teacher providing 'unfair' punishment, or 'boring' lessons. For example:

P1: Nobody knows nothing in [particular academic subject] ... because, like, the teacher he speaks very fast and you don't understand, and when you ask him to speak slowly he just speaks more fast...and he shouts at you and he says: "you know where the door is" and stuff.

I: So what do you do?

P1: Nothing...[I] just sit down with my writing paper and just do scribbles.

The participant boys generally described families as supportive and they were rarely cited as specific causes of individual boys' problems. However, it was possible for boys to think about examples of their friends who did not have such supportive home environments and the implications of this were made clear:

I: You said there are some families where there are a lot of arguments and stuff?

P8: Yeah.

I: What do you think about boys who are in families like that - do they find it difficult?

P8: Yeah mostly...they can't stay at home so they have to go out.

I: And what happens to those boys who have to go outside all the time?

P8: They make trouble innit? They like can't...They got anger and they just, like, go out and do something bad...

Within friendship groups, problems included 'being bossed about' by another friend; not having enough money to feel able to join in with the activities of the group; and perceived disloyalty by certain members of the friendship group. Such problems were described in ways indicating how difficult they were to address:

I: What kinds of arguments might friends have together?

P4: Talking behind you...saying one thing to you and going round and telling other people you're stupid or something like that.

I: Right. And what would happen if someone was doing that?

P4: Other people might get the wrong idea of me.

In relation to the boys' residential areas, the problems most mentioned included: 'too much crime', 'too many drugs', being attacked by boys from other areas, and occasionally experiencing verbal and physical racial abuse:

P2: Well...the man started it...because he started talking to us and everything, and we said "we don't wanna talk", and he started saying thingy...about this terrorism thing...and we said "don't say terrorism to me" and then he started shouting and everything...and we said "what you shouting for? We didn't do nothing" and he started a fight.

(2) Phenomenon: I need to sort it out.

Recognition that there was a problem provided the causal conditions for the central phenomenon, which was a belief that it needed to be 'sorted out'. This was the task that their subsequent actions would be directed towards achieving. The strategies for successfully 'sorting out' the problem were twofold – either removing the problem, or coping with it better through peer support. An example of the first, concerned silencing the racist talk of a local resident:

I: And what do you think about what happened to him in the end?

P4: He's one of the few people in my area who are racist openly. And he thought nothing was going to happen to him, and then when it happened [he was beaten up] he just sat quietly; I think he deserved it.

An illustration of the second strategy concerned not understanding the work involved in a lesson at school:

I: [Asking about a teacher's poorly-explained work assignment] What about other boys in your class...? Do you talk to each other about it?

P1: Yeah, they always take the mick out of the teacher, like "You know what he said today?..." and things like that.

I: And does it feel better if you can laugh about it?

P1: Yeah...but he still doesn't even explain the work properly.

The data contained examples of this process across all four key social situations mentioned above: School (e.g., resolving a poor relationship with a teacher), Family (e.g., negotiating alliances between siblings within the family), Friends (e.g., not having as much money to spend as the others), and Area (e.g., responding to the threat of physical violence from boys from other areas). *Removing* the problem seemed to have more potency in 'sorting it out' because the act of *coping with* a problem acknowledged that the problem was still present and that the individual still needed to manage an amount of residual anxiety attached to it.

(3) Context: 'sorting it out on my own' or 'looking for back-up'.

Some individuals demonstrated skill in sorting out their own problems, without needing to ask for help, for example, in relation to being bullied at school:

P6: I just ignore them and they ignore me. Forget it. And...sometimes when I lost my temper I chucked a chair at the boy. And after that people were afraid of me. They just kept quiet.

However, in the vast majority of cases the 'sorting out' of a problem was an interpersonal or group process where boys would seek 'back-up' from an individual or group identified by them. This means that the context questions 'Do I know someone who can help me sort it out?' and

'Can I sort it out on my own?' are critical ones. Finding suitable candidates to provide 'back-up' seemed to be based on certain properties, perceived by the individual boy as being present in the person or group that they had identified: powerfulness (can they do something about the problem?); knowledge (do they know enough about the problem?); willingness (will they want to do anything about the problem?); understanding (do they know how I feel about the problem?); and approachability (is it easy or difficult to go to them to ask for help?). For example, in terms of *knowledge, approachability* and *understanding*:

I: So how might you decide whether you are going to speak to your friends, your cousins, brothers, sisters or a teacher? What is it that would help you decide to go to a certain person?

P5: Who is more likely to be able to answer it...or give advice on it. And who won't laugh about it...

(4) Intervening conditions: 'I go to them' or 'They come to me'.

If a boy judged that a specific person or group met the necessary criteria as a potential source of support then it was likely that he would decide to approach that source in order to gain the support needed. This 'intervening condition' prepared the ground for the ultimate action/interaction between an individual and the identified source of support.

At school, in the context of bullying, for example, it might be an identified supportive teacher who, it was judged, had the necessary power, knowledge, willingness, understanding and approachability for them to be contacted in the hope of having the problem resolved. However, in many cases whilst a teacher might have *most* of these necessary properties, it was the important property of 'approachability' that seemed to dominate, and given that friends had this in abundance, it was often they who were approached for support instead:

I: And what sort of help do you ask for?

P8: Anything really...You just go up to them, 'Can you help me out? Come...'

The drawback here was that although friends might be the most 'approachable' source of support within the school environment, they did not score so highly on 'powerfulness'. This often meant

that the type of 'back-up' provided by friends at school was aimed at *coping* with the problem, because the 'back up' they provide was not powerful enough to *remove* it.

In families, parents were often defined as supportive, but their weaker credentials in terms of knowledge of the problem and approachability meant that the topics with which they could help were perceived as more limited. However, older sisters, brothers and cousins were often cited as being in possession of many of the necessary properties of helpfulness. For example:

P3: She [participant's sister] always wins in an argument. And she won't be afraid to ask the question directly. If there's a problem she will go directly to the head or something like that.

Friends were cited as being so approachable that they were usually able to recognise that one of their members had a problem and would approach him about it instead. For example:

I: Why is it easier to ask your friends for help?

P1: 'Cause they understand, innit? But I don't need to ask, they'll just come.

Similarly, regarding problems in their 'area', the presence of their own friends, and other subgroups within the population of the area as a whole, were the most likely source of 'back-up'. This included older boys, who were perceived as being powerful, knowledgeable, willing, understanding and approachable in attending to the problems of the younger boys in their area.

I: So people your age...do they ever get drawn into those [fights]?

P5: Yeah...but, like, if there's any problem we just ask the older ones to sort it out for us.

Interestingly, two other important sources of 'back-up' cited by the boys were the Community Youth Clubs, and the Police Cadets. Both agencies were described as being an important source of adult support outside that provided by parents and teachers. Many of the boys explained that without these resources, there would be many more problems in their area:

I: What would you say life would be like if you didn't have that youth club?

P7: I don't know...there would be like more fights on the streets...and if you didn't have anyone to talk to...you'd be, like, always under stress.

(5) Interaction: They back me up (advisory/active).

The type of 'back-up' available to the boys within their different social situations varied, but there was a general split between 'advisory back-up' and 'active back-up'. Advisory back-up was perceived as important in helping an individual to 'cope' better with a problem, and important sources for this were the LSC department in the school, older siblings, cousins, parents and close friends:

P9: If I get into trouble or anything...I can talk to my sister.

I: Would you talk to her before your parents?

P9: Yeah, 'cause then she can give me advice and all that...or help me out if I'm in trouble.

'Active back-up' was more identified as a strategy for 'removing problems', and the LSC at school was again identified as a source, along with older siblings. However, the most widely cited example of 'active back-up' was that provided by the individual's close friends or the other sub-friendship groups, including the older boys, in their area:

P6: Yeah – there's this time yeah, when this man come through our street yeah, saying 'Paki' and stuff... and we told the big boys. And the next time...the man chased us and the man nearly hit one of us and then we ran and then we told our big ones and the big ones, then they hit him.

Given that 'active back-up' was perceived as more effective in 'removing the problem', a boy's relationship with his friends and the other adolescent groups in his area was extremely important. The type of 'back-up' provided by these groups ranged from giving money to an individual who did not have enough money of his own, to having a fight on behalf of an individual who had been provoked by another individual or group, usually from a rival area.

(6) Consequences: I stay with them.

The consequences of receiving effective support from a source that had been identified and approached in this way, often resulted in the individual maintaining his links with this source in the future. This was most clearly demonstrated by close friendship groups, whose commitment to reciprocating support, 'backing each other up', was so strong that it might be provided even if the morality of the 'back-up' was in question. The following comment illustrated this degree of commitment:

P1: They *always* help me. We always help each other.

I: So you can rely on your friends?

P1: Yeah.

I: What does that feel like then to have a group of friends like that?

P1: Proud

(emphasis added).

Although many of the boys commented that being 'backed-up' was an extremely powerful aspect of a good friendship, they also acknowledged the difficulties of having to 'back-up' a friend if they didn't agree with his cause. Given that this 'back-up' might include having fights on behalf of the friend, this could strain the commitment for some individuals. However, the notion of maintaining links with a source of support also fostered very positive friendships and close sibling relationships – and indeed mutually cooperative student/teacher relationships, where a boy perceived the teacher as helpful and in return would be prepared to invest his energies in working harder and improving his participation in class.

The reverse of 'I stay with them' also seemed apparent when a perceived source of support failed to provide 'back-up' when required. Disengagement from an existing group required an individual to quickly seek out new social settings where sources of 'back-up' could be identified:

P2: Yeah, in year seven, yeah...he was like the leader, and if he got in fights then we always used to back him up and...when we used to get in fights he used

to say, "you pussy why don't you go and fight, you're" like "a wimp..." and stuff. And he never used to back us up and we used to back him up...then I just left him and said 'Nah, I ain't gonna hang around with you no more' and I went with the other boys.

This provoked the development of new friendships, and new social connections, where boys were able to feel 'backed-up' by their immediate group of friends. As one boy put it:

P8: We're sweet with each other, innit? We're safe...we never do anything to like hurt each other, you get me? We're always with us

I: And how would you describe a good friend?

P8: He won't start with you...he will never muck about with you...he'll stay always safe with you...like... he will never try to get you in danger.

Discussion

'Being backed up' seemed to be an integral social process in the lives of the participant boys, which not only helped them to form and regulate close friendship groups, but also influenced the quality of their relationships with their family, school teachers, and community resources. It is striking that what began as an explorative project without a pre-conceived agenda ended up becoming an account of social support. This is particularly interesting, given the debates within the literature as to whether adolescence is a time of crisis or not (Mason, 1995) or whether ethnic minority adolescents face further hardship than those of the majority culture (Coleman and Hendry, 1999). Perhaps it was inevitable that discussions about 'problems' and how to 'sort them out' should have become the main focus for this piece of work. Alexander's (2000) extensive ethnographic study of a group of Bangladeshi boys in Southwark, also demonstrates back-up as a very apparent part of the friendship and family ties involved in tackling problems. However – with data collected some years on, in a near but different location, from boys who are a little younger – the present study's grounded theory includes greater

evidence than Alexander's (which was conducted amidst a fraught local situation), of positive service involvement in the 'back up' talked about by participants (schools, youth clubs, police cadets). No doubt, the setting for the interviews and the interviewer's role as a psychologist will have influenced this process. Indeed, while grounded theory methods achieved our aim to give articulation to the 'voice' of a comparatively unheard minority group, we acknowledge that the data analysis and the very presentation of the results involved our own non-neutral influence. Nevertheless, the participant boys very much tended to talk more about how their problems are *solved*, rather than what feels like to *have* a problem, and in this sense, rather than being a 'problem focused' group, we found them to be much more 'solution focused' in orientation. However, given that the study took a solution focused approach in the interview schedule, it is possible that the solution focused nature of the boys' discussions may have been partly attributable to this.

In their accounts, although adolescence as a *potentially* difficult experience was discernable, there was no sense of it being 'crisis' or 'conflict' driven. This said, their representations of back-up were thoroughly communal, and it would be instructive for further research to include 'negative case' examples, such as boys identified as socially isolated, and the ways that they seek to solve their problems.

Disadvantage and discrimination were both discussed, particularly in relation to the boys' employment prospects, and different boys had different approaches to resolving this, largely depending on who was providing them with 'back-up' in any given scenario (teachers, friends, or older boys in the area). This positive identification with sources of 'back-up' supports more recent variations on Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory. Capozza and Brown (2000) suggest that group membership is not restricted to single groups, rather individuals may choose to align themselves with a variety of groups, each with different identities, cultures and norms. Crisp and Hewstone (2000) call this 'multiple categorisation'. Multiple-group membership seemed to be a reality for the boys we interviewed, but the common factor in each group that they chose to identify with was that an element of reciprocal support was likely to be available to them. This

was the case whether they identified with being a member of a particular friendship group, area, school or ethnicity. It is now recognised that the processes that lead to a group sharing a common identity are largely driven by positive mutual reciprocity, rather than simply a shared dislike for an 'other' (Capozza and Brown, 2000). Social Identity Theory calls this re-categorisation, and the participant boys demonstrated this in their reports of spontaneous 'coming together' of various sub-groups within an area, usually to play football, or attend a community activity like the youth club or the Police Cadets.

The importance of the friendship group cannot be overstated in this study. Given that this was a group of boys belonging to a disadvantaged ethnic minority group one might interpret this emphasis as our support for established generalisations about ethnic minority adolescents relying more on social problem solving (Cohen and Wills, 1985) or tending to develop stronger friendship groups (Ghuman, 1998), than their ethnic majority counterparts. Before jumping to this conclusion however, it is necessary to tease out how far the results were influenced by the boys' cultural and gendered identity (as Bangladeshi males) on the one hand, and their socio-economic position in society (as residents of an under-privileged, under-resourced inner city community) on the other. Hall's (1992) notion of 'new ethnicities' emphasises that the socio-economic environment of communities can often construct a greater sense of identification between apparently different ethnic groups, than apparently similar ones. So, Bangladeshi communities in British urban localities, for example, might have more in common with the underprivileged urban communities of other UK-ethnic groups - even 'white British' ones - than the rural communities of Sylhet in Bangladesh. However, the authors prefer to recognize the present data as being specific to the boys in this particular community, and therefore subject to a unique blend of social, economic and political influences. This is in line with Developmental Contextualism (Adams and others, 1996), which emphasises an understanding of adolescence as being rooted within social, political, geographical and historical parameters. As stated earlier, negative case analyses and extended theoretical sampling might yield an array of similar detailed accounts useful for services working with young people in general.

One aim for public services working with adolescents from ethnic minority communities is to develop more ecologically relevant ways of providing support for young people, coherent with the ways that they seek to provide it for themselves. In the case of the Bangladeshi boys represented in this paper and their peers living in a deprived urban environment, it is important to explore how services might work towards meeting the criteria of knowledge, power, understanding, willingness and approachability as they seek to attend to the needs of this under-represented population. Indeed, it may be that these principles have wider relevance for all young people living and growing up in disadvantaged urban communities in the UK today.

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Figure 1 – The Core Category: ‘Being Backed Up’

